

Responding to violence against women with authentic morality

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RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WITH AUTHENTIC MORALITY

M.L. Penn and R. Nardos

Overcoming Violence against Women and Girls: The International Campaign to Eradicate a Worldwide Problem

Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, 255 pp., ISBN 0-7425-2500-7

This is a very interesting book that seeks to address a number of very difficult problems. It starts with an excellent review of the international response to various forms of oppression and discrimination of women and girls by outlining the historical progress of international statutes and laws from within various departments of the UN. From the outset, this book is aware of international differences and as such acknowledges the different forms of oppression facing women in both developed and developing countries. Subsequent chapters focus on specific forms of abuse and provide excellent international statistics on the prevalence of different forms of abuse facing women and children. This includes a chapter on sexual violence that includes: an exploration of incest and child sexual abuse; sexual inequality in child-rearing; the underestimation of the damage caused by childhood sexual abuse; trafficking; rape and sexual violence by armed forces; rape as a weapon and instrument of domination and control; sexual harassment; and cyberporn and the sexual exploitation of children. As this list illustrates, each chapter is comprehensive in its description of the ways in which different forms of abuse manifest themselves and the impact they have. Some chapters, although not all, also include some reference to the legal responses outlined within the introduction, as well as the theory of authentic morality that underpins the book as a whole.

The authors, in organizing the book in the way they have, appear to be presenting the legal discourse as a useful but ultimately limited solution to the problem of gendered violence. In seeking to explain how legal solutions, akin to a liberal feminist agenda of equality, might not be adequate the authors state:

The underlying assumption appears to be that when the national and international instruments necessary for securing gender equality and for protecting women's rights have been fashioned and applied, gender-based discrimination and abuse will find an inhospitable environment and gradually disappear . . . violence against women and girls is sustained by long-standing, maladaptive patterns of thinking and relating, legal strategies, unaccompanied by efforts to address the intrapersonal dimensions of the problem, are likely to prove ineffective. (pp. 13–14)

The solution to violence against women and girls offered by the authors is based on a theory of authentic morality and in relation to this theory many of the chapters include some discussion of the philosophical concepts that underpin such a theory. Ultimately, this book is challenging the legal discourse by referring to the metaphysical interactions that occur within and between humans. In Chapter 2 ('Sexual Violence against Women and Girls'), the authors introduce the moral and spiritual dimensions of that problem in terms of the challenge of self-mastery. By introducing Plato, the authors begin to challenge the notion of the 'force of law and threat of punishment' as an adequate response to 'individuals [who] cannot regulate his [*sic*] own passions' (p. 67).

Chapter 3 addresses physical abuse including: battering; domestic violence in lesbian relationships; violence against domestic and migrant workers; conceptualizing domestic violence as torture; and the impact of gender-based violence on children. As with Chapter 2, this chapter is well referenced and avoids focusing on western literature where the impact of global poverty is often ignored. The discussion of violence within lesbian relationships also ensures that the authors do not ignore the problem of abuse by women in intimate relationships with other women.

Chapter 4 is concerned with culture, traditional practices and gender-based violence and includes a lengthy section on female genital circumcision that highlights the campaign against such practices as well as recent information about the practice. This chapter also includes a section examining dowry-related violence.

Part 3 of this book begins to move away from the specific examples of gender violence outlined in previous chapters, and begins to look at potential solutions. Chapter 5 is concerned with education that is presented both as an example of gender discrimination as well as potential solution to it. The authors state:

While some of the factors limiting women's access to education are structural, significant barriers to the education of female children are attitudinal. Women and girls are routinely denied access to education out of fear of the impact of too much freedom for females, a preference for investing in sons, and traditional stereotypes that continue to raise questions about the usefulness of educating girls. Nevertheless, a significant body of research shows that when women and girls are given access to education, it is among the most effective of all means for raising the level of health, education, and prosperity for the entire population. (p. 105)

This chapter differentiates between different types of education, which it defines as, material education, human education and spiritual education. Material education relates to basic knowledge concerned with improving 'humanity's physical well-being and health' (p. 106). Human education, on the other hand, relates to those areas of science, mathematics, arts and humanities that distinguish humans from animals and within which men have predominated. The notion of spiritual education that is introduced again moves us back into a discussion of the underlying moral theory of the book. In introducing the concept of spirituality and morality, the authors suggest, on the basis of research, that without moral leadership the global initiatives intended to address, for example, education will ultimately fail.

At this point in the book, I felt that the authors failed to bring together adequately the violence outlined in previous chapters and the moral theory they seek to propose as a potential solution to it. Primarily, I think this fails because the authors become degendered in their discussion of moral theory. For example:

A somewhat subtle but crucial logical distinction must be made here. It is not social structures but individuals who compete, seek power, or engage in conflictual behaviour towards each other. The very existence of morality and moral questions depends upon the existence of individual free will. (p. 116)

Having spent the first 100 pages of this book outlining the abuse of women and children, predominately by individual men or social structures dominated by men, it is disappointing that in discussing the relationship between individuals

and social structures in relation to agency the gender of the actors they are referring to is ignored. The authors do acknowledge that women's agency is somewhat 'thwarted', which impacts on their ability to achieve justice, but do so in a context where the solution they propose is again one of 'human virtue, and a healthy community goal' (p. 120). This begs the question of whose virtue and whose community, a problem which I felt was not adequately addressed.

Part 3 of this book continues with a comprehensive outline of the 'Authenticity Project', which advocates a basic framework for moral education as a way to challenge gendered violence through its regard of 'altruistic love as the fundamental principle of human relations' (p. 127). Once again the admirable principles and virtues outlined in this section failed to overcome my scepticism of this project on the basis that the gender of actors seemed inadequately explained. For example, the authors state:

The evidence of history has led the Authenticity Project to another basic principle of its program of moral development: *the human being is capable of both extreme cruelty and extreme altruism.* (p. 128)

This statement appears incongruous against the many examples of abuse, by men, against women and children outlined in the book up until this point. Furthermore, when introducing the notion of victimization the authors suggest that:

... our response to individual evil should be governed not so much by the degree of injustice perpetrated against us, or even by the other's active intention to harm, as by the educated effectiveness of our response. We must respond in a manner that maximises the likelihood that the perpetrator will gain effective insight into the nature of his own moral condition. (p. 131)

This concept of response fails to acknowledge that women have, throughout history, survived the abuse of men both individually and collectively by many methods including by appealing to their better nature. Within the philosophical paradigm itself, women have frequently been presented in this role as arbiters of men's inability to control their inner selves. Such concepts, I felt, were not adequately critiqued. Also absent at this juncture is a discussion of restorative justice – the principles of which this extract seems to be advocating. Bringing in such a discussion at this point would have brought the book full circle in terms of the historic use of legal remedies and moved it forward with a notion of authentic morality.

Chapter 7 develops the authentic morality theory further by examining emotional competency before Chapter 8 examines the role of men in eradicating gender-based violence. This is, unfortunately, one of the shortest chapters in the book, but does raise the important question of the role of men in challenging the oppression of women, not just in extreme cases of abuse but within wider social structures (such as capitalism) that present gendered images which impact on girls, women and wider society. Similarly, there is an acknowledgement of the role of perpetrator programmes in beginning to challenge the moral education of individual men. This final acknowledgement of the active role of men in challenging their own and/or other men's behaviour and spiritual morality again felt somewhat lacking. Consequently, I felt that this book should have focused far more on the behaviour of men and been explicit in naming whose spiritual morality the Authenticity Project is concerned with.

To conclude, this is a very interesting book that attempts to fulfil two aims and doesn't quite succeed in doing so. The first two parts are excellent in describing the impact and prevalence of gendered based violence within the historical context of international law. Additionally, relevant extracts from international statutes are included in the appendices, which would make an excellent reference for students. In my opinion, the authors failed to successfully marry this critique of the practice of gendered violence with the moral theory of the Authenticity Project. To conclude, I felt that it might have been better to publish two books, allowing a more adequate exploration of the distinct parts of the book rather than bringing the two things together.

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OCCUPIED AFGHAN WOMEN'S LIVES: MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES, MULTIPLE CONSCIOUSNESSES

Elaheh Rostami Povey
Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion
London: Zed Books, 2007, 159 pp., ISBN 978-1-84277-855-5

In *Afghan Women*, Povey provides us with a powerful account of women's struggle for survival and resistance during the Afghan wars, illustrated by life stories collected among various groups of women both within Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora in Pakistan, Iran, the UK and the US. Women's voices emerge out of the narrative; voices that have hardly been heard since the invasion of Afghanistan; voices imprinted with a material realism in great contrast with western representations of Afghan women since 9/11. From a feminist postcolonial standpoint, Povey depicts Afghan women as politically conscious of the rules of global politics, having a clear vision of how women's status should be improved from within, taking into account culture and religion, but first of all the material conditions of Afghan society under western occupation.

Five years after the 'liberation' of Afghanistan, security conditions are worsening, attacks against girls' schools are multiplying, and threats against politically active women are increasing. Povey questions the extent to which the US and their allies were really interested in the plight of Afghan women. She shows how the condition of women has been used to develop a 'moral grammar of war' (Weber, 2005) and to gain public support for military intervention. As the 'War on Terror' seems to have reached a point of no return, Povey warns western countries about the risk for Afghan women of getting caught in the middle of an international discursive struggle, at times portrayed as a clash of civilizations and at other times as simply a matter of human rights, and a nationalist discourse that defends with absolute certainty the terms of a contested terrain in which they themselves have had very little input in creating.

Povey talks about Afghan women's political agenda for defending women's rights. She explains how the international community has been deaf to Afghan women's views on gender relations. She speaks about an indigenous women's movement that has emerged out of Afghan women's solidarity networks developed during the various Afghan wars. If this is what I expected to find when I came